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SISTERS OF MERCY

IN THE

Church of England.



"THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONSTRAINETH US,"—2 Cor. v. 14.

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SISTERS OF MERCY

IN THE

Church of England.

WHEN Almighty GOD raises up in His Church the spirit and power of self-devotedness for CHRIST's sake, and the sake of those souls for whom CHRIST died, it is a source of deep thankfulness to every Christian heart. For the spirit and power of self-devotion are gifts of GOD, talents committed to our charge, bringing with them their burden of responsibility both to individuals and the Church. True it is that this spirit must be possessed in a lesser or greater degree by every disciple of Him, Who leaving us an example that we should tread in His steps, said "If any man will come after Me, let him *deny himself*, and take up his cross daily." But it pleaseth Him Who when "He led captivity captive, gave gifts unto men,"—"for the perfecting of the saints—for the edifying of the Body of CHRIST," to cause "diversities of gifts but the same Spirit; and as to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit;" so is the *power of self-devotion* given in larger measure unto others, to be

used, as all the rest, in the service of God—to the furtherance of His glory, and the salvation of men.

At different times, and in different places, as the need of the Church may be, we see this Christian grace brought out with an energy that seems capable of overcoming every obstacle which presents itself, either without or within the Church; and if used, as it is given, in the power of the Spirit, adding a lustre to faith, and a testimony to truth, which unbelievers can neither darken nor gainsay.

The spiritual destitution of masses in our large towns, with its spectre attendant bodily wretchedness, is in our own day one of the most stirring incentives to that earnest longing for the souls of men, which manifests itself in self-devotion for their sakes. Surely it is to this spirit that we may ascribe the raising up in our own Branch of the Catholic Church, within these last few years—we might almost say, with one exception, these last few months,—of those little bands of devoted souls, known by the winning appellation of “Sisters of Mercy.” And one there is whose name will brightly shine upon the records of these Sisterhoods, and be remembered ever with admiring and Christian love, as one to whom this spirit and this power were given in large measure, and who faithfully employed the talents committed to her charge.

Many are watching with deep interest the growth of these Institutions, still in their infancy amongst us. Some with unbounded confidence in their success; others with a cautious and misgiving eye; some with enthusiastic admiration of the system, others with admiration of the self-devoted spirit, but disapproval of this form of its manifestation.

At the present progress of these Institutions in our

land, and with the prejudice with which the delinquencies of Rome have so strongly imbued the English Church against aught that in *appearance* only bears a resemblance to anything connected with her erring sister, there must be unavoidably much ignorance and misconception as to the nature and objects of these Sisterhoods. And it is with an earnest desire to aid, if ever so little, in the removal of these obstacles to their success, that the writer of this tract proposes briefly to consider the subject, hoping, at least, to place it before the reader in a clear and definite manner; and to show that in these loving bands of Sisters of Mercy, there is nothing contrary to the Spirit of the English Church, nothing at variance with that holy faith which worketh by love. And if it might be that any suggestions here contained should be useful to any who are now forming these Sisterhoods, and moulding them as increasing knowledge and experience dictate, the writer will feel deeply thankful; nor less so, if mistakes should be detected and pointed out by a more experienced and skilful hand. We want the subject to be made known and understood, and those who take a real and deep interest in it, will gladly receive any help towards the furtherance of this object.

Let us then proceed to the consideration of the nature and objects of these Institutions. And first we suppose it will be asked, "What is their object?" We answer—Their object is to benefit the poor and destitute portion of our population, by means of systematic visiting, and useful and religious instruction. Any one who has visited amongst the poor of our large towns with any degree of Christian feeling and earnestness, must in some measure have been sensible of the effect of sympathy and a few kind words of admonition, *even upon the ignorant and depraved. Especially in*

times of want or sickness, apparently hardened souls have become wonderfully softened ; so that the hearts of Christian visitors may well rejoice that they should have been led to the house of distress, at the time when a few words seemed to have so marvellous and unwonted a power. But these impressions need following up, to make them, with God's blessing, of any avail to the salvation of the soul. District visitors may do much, but those who are in a sphere where other and engrossing duties claim their time and thoughts, cannot possibly do all that is required in this work amongst the poor. Our scanty supply of clergy cannot do it, for a large portion of their time must necessarily be occupied with their more immediate ministerial duties. What an important place can here be filled by the well trained Sister of Mercy ; *here is her sphere of duty*, for which her daily life is a continual training, and in which, as a *woman* she is possessed of advantages peculiar to her sex, for she can be at the same time the nurse and the instructress, the kind and able adviser in all domestic details, and the gentle though earnest denouncer of all evil ways. Then, again, there are those regions of destitution and vice, into which even district visitors but rarely penetrate ; some shudder at the thought, and say they are not safe ; but if any one may venture into these dens of wretchedness, we believe it is the Sister of Mercy ; her sex and her office combined are, under GOD, a safeguard possessed by none besides ; and the efforts of these devoted servants of CHRIST, few as they have at present been amongst us, to reclaim the vicious and the fallen, have met with unexpected blessing and success.

But another great object of these Sisterhoods is *the instruction of the young* ; not those only or chiefly whose *parents* have sufficient interest in their children's welfare

to make an effort to send them to school, even at a sacrifice to themselves ; but those, who, alas ! young in years are old in sin, who seem brought into the world, and then left to fare amidst its depravity how they may. These outcasts—these little ones for whom CHRIST died, are the peculiar charge of the Sisters of Mercy. Their aim is to seek them out, to extend over them the arms of Christian love, and by holy influences to win them from their wandering path : when this is done, to give them sound instruction, bring them or restore them to the Fold of CHRIST, and fit them in various ways to gain an honest livelihood. These are the two great works which in all their numerous branches, form the daily duties of the members of these Sisterhoods. Grateful may those Pastors be who possess such assistance as is afforded by one of these devoted little bands established in their respective parishes or districts, for in them they have hands and hearts ever at their command, and ready and efficient help for any work which may be found for them to do.

Those who from their position, aptness for the work, and power of self-devotion feel that they are called to this sphere of duty, and have these objects set before them as the *occupation of their daily life*, must necessarily separate themselves from other ties and engagements. All their energies must be given to the work, for they will all be taxed to the utmost ; and especially will they need for daily support in their arduous labours, all the strength and the closer communion with their LORD and Master, which private prayer and meditation, and the public ordinances of grace can afford. And this brings us to the consideration of the nature of these Sisterhoods, in other words their *form* and *discipline*.

Separated unto the work whereunto they are called.

these Sisters of Mercy find in union and community mutual comfort and help individually, and a power of system and regularity in their work which *could not be had otherwise*. Their house daily sending forth its streams of charity, is felt to be a refuge for the penitent and distressed. Under their roof is collected the orphan and the outcast to be fed, and clothed, and instructed, for this world and the next : snatched as brands from the burning, and brought under a system of holy discipline and love such as can be found in no other "Orphan's Home." Children left destitute are taught and cared for, and trained to gain an honest livelihood : young girls upon the verge of ruin are found and saved, and when by sojourn and instruction in the Sisters' Home, they have been made fit for service, places in Christian families are sought for them, and they are sent forth to bless the day when in their abode of vice they were found by the Sisters of Mercy.

The first thing needful in establishing a Sisterhood is to find a Head or Superior fitted to take the management of the little community and to direct its labours. She, with only one or two besides can form a nucleus round which others gather as the work proceeds. And as it is requisite that all who give themselves up to this work should be well trained for it, and have their powers guided in that direction for which they are the most adapted, it is found desirable that before being admitted members of the Sisterhood, they should pass through a term of trial and discipline, in order that they themselves, as well as those with whom they are associated may know, whether they are really fitted for this life, and in what part of the work they should be appointed *to labour*. Thus there will be usually in each of these *Institutions*, a class, so to speak, of novitiates, in train-

ing to become members of different Sisterhoods where their call may appear to be.

To become a member of a sisterhood involves no irrevocable vows, implies no assumed sanctity, no meritorious propitiation of heaven: it is not to lead a life of seclusion, meditation and prayer, although these two latter are indeed needed as daily preparation, for the life of *active service* and self-denial both of body and mind to which the Sisters of Mercy are called. They are devoted to the service of CHRIST in ministering to the poor, and those who sit in spiritual darkness; for the love of CHRIST, manifested in love for the immortal souls for whom He died, they separate themselves when God calls them to the work. They are not constrained to remain in this sphere longer than it appears their duty to do so: while in it, they are bound to submit themselves to that discipline and rule which is prescribed for the well-being of each sisterhood. Whether in a more advanced stage of these institutions, it will be thought well to have the same order of rule and discipline for all, is as yet uncertain, but probably, they will be alike in their general plan, although different in some details. Each Sister contributes a certain amount of money to the general fund, either as an endowment or as an annual income during her connexion with the Sisterhood: this amount may vary according to the pecuniary ability of each, but the average fixed can be made up by those who have larger means at their disposal; and those members of CHRIST'S Church who are themselves placed in other spheres of duty, but still have the success of these Institutions deeply at heart, may do much towards it either by paying the annual sum required by some one well fitted for the work, but having no means *to maintain herself* in it; or by placing at the disposal

of the Sisterhood, such funds as shall enable them to receive those Sisters who have only their own exertions and devotedness to bestow. The fund of the Sisterhood is a common fund, and of course it is divided, and appropriated to different claims according to the rules laid down, under the superintendence of the Superior.

The habits of these Sisters of Mercy, it will be supposed, must be in accordance with their self-denying life. Luxury is no promoter of sympathy in our fellow creatures' woes, no friend to activity either of body or mind. Simple fare, moderate sleep, endurance of fatigue, with oft-recurring times of prayer, meditation, and study of God's word, are needful to keep alive and strong the power of self-devotion implanted in any soul, and to render the Sister of Mercy fitted for her arduous work of love. To keep the body in subjection is most needful for those, who with vigour and true sympathy would alleviate the bodily wants of others : and to have the mind stored with Divine Truth, and well versed in all the subtleties of the human soul by an intimate knowledge of itself, is most necessary for those engaged in the work of bringing spiritual light into spiritual darkness, of probing in order to heal, and of instructing every variety of character and ignorance in the way of truth and salvation.

Therefore we find the daily rule of these Sisterhoods formed with a view to this end. The details of this daily rule we will not enter into here, for, as we have said, these may vary, but the principle is the same in all.

There is one point however connected with it, which shall be briefly mentioned, to remove any misconception which may have arisen, or shall arise, concerning it ; *and that is, the restraint practised upon the use of*

the tongue. In communities such as these Sisterhoods form, there must be danger in allowing unrestrained conversation at all times.

Waste of time, idle and unchristian gossip, and a disturbance of that serenity of soul so much to be desired, are the dangers likely to accrue. Therefore it is advisable that there should be certain times and seasons for free and mutual intercourse, for their own refreshment, and exchange of thoughts upon, and accounts of, the various departments of their work : but that at other times of their assembling together, a reader should be appointed to read aloud books appropriately selected, and silence maintained amongst the rest. A certain amount of healthful recreation both for body and mind, should be enjoined as a part of the necessary discipline, and the visits of friends to the Sisters, or the Sisters to their friends be allowed under proper regulations. General visitors to the Institution must of course be confined to fixed visiting hours, or the duties of the Sisterhood, especially those of the Superior, will be liable to undue interruption. The clergy under whose spiritual care each Sisterhood is placed, have access at all times, and the Bishop of the diocese should be considered as one of the appointed visitors.

The dress of the Sisters of Mercy has been a matter of some discussion, and therefore shall be touched upon here. It is felt generally, that in every station there is a fitness of outward habiliment to that station, and to the work and duties connected with it : and common sense and feeling tell us, that costliness or gayness of apparel, is out of place in those whose daily duties call them to minister at the sick and dying bed of want and poverty ; to visit the wretched and dirty abodes of vice and ignorance ; or to teach in the schoolroom of ragged

children and destitute orphans. But besides plainness of dress, an uniform costume for every Sisterhood is found most desirable : in the first place it gives them a distinctive character in their parish or district, and is thereby a kind of introduction wherever they may go : their office and mission are at once known when they knock at a poor man's door : it is an outward mark of system and unity, not to be despised : and moreover it is, humanly speaking, a *protection* among the regions of vice into which their steps must be led. The style of the costume will probably vary as the details of discipline may do ; quietness and simplicity are requisite in all : probably in large and dirty towns a black dress will be found the most useful, but as much as possible should be done to remove any effect of *gloom* about it, for Heavenly Charity should not wear the garb of earthly mourning.

These few points connected with the subject of Sisterhoods—viz. their object ; the mode of their formation ; the separation from worldly pursuits ; their daily life of bodily and mental rule, and somewhat austere discipline, and their costume, have thus been briefly touched upon, with a hope, as before said, in few words to remove in some degree misconception upon the subject ; and to do away with the feeling of mystery and fear associated in many Christian minds with these things, which they are apt to look upon as strange practices, considered meritorious in themselves, and not, as their true advocates would ever strongly impress upon all, and as we have endeavoured to show, as having a *reason* in them ; as means to ends ; and as worth nothing except inasmuch as they shall be found in accordance with *GOD's will*, and so bring down a blessing upon them for the *sake of our LORD and SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST*.

And now who will give themselves to this holy work—or rather, who ought to give themselves to it? We answer negatively in the first place, and say,—*none*, who have not powers requisite for it: and again, *none*, who having these powers, yet feel that other duties are placed before them which it would be *sin* to leave. To such as these, the path of self-denial may be in continuing where they are; and if this be the path appointed for them by their God, they know that there alone they can expect His blessing; so that however their earnest souls may yearn to give themselves to more active service, however they may be stirred within them by the destitute and ignorant thousands that seem to cry aloud for help from the dense populations of our large towns; if family ties and domestic duties, plainly present obstacles which it would be wrong to overcome, let them feel assured that the power of self-devotion they possess, and for the right use of which they are responsible to Him Who gave it, must *not* be turned into another channel, however much the sphere of a Sister of Mercy may seem suited for its full exercise. Snares are all around us, and we need watchfulness lest while we think we are doing God's will, we are only following our own.

But there are those to whom no obstacles which may not be rightly overcome, present themselves, and who in powers of body and mind are well fitted for the work. Let them give themselves to it and they will reap a rich harvest of reward. To be allowed to spend and be spent in such a service is indeed a high privilege. To Whom are they called to minister? Think of Him Who said, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these My brethren, ye did it unto Me!" Are there not those also who bereft of many earthly ties, seem,—though for a

member of CHRIST'S Church it can be only *seeming*—to have none to live for but themselves? Are there not those who having passed the spring-time, and the early summer of life without contracting marriage ties, still linger, as it were, upon the confines of a region to which they do not belong, where they find little sympathy and few opportunities for the exercise of the sympathies they possess, who at last too often sink into a state of deadness of feeling, and an utter want of appreciation of the peculiar claims of a single life, most fatal to their own eternal interests? Oh! if there be a spark of Divine Love in their souls, let them try if a novitiate in a Sisterhood would not fan it to a flame, and make them earnest and self-denying Sisters of Mercy.

Christian Parents—allow a few words also to be addressed to you. Suffer yourselves to be affectionately exhorted not to *make* difficulties, if you see in any of your daughters' minds a fitness and a desire for this almost evangelising work. You would perhaps willingly part with them in marriage, but if that appears not to be the state of life to which it pleases GOD to call them, and if no urgent duties bid you keep them with you, why not willingly yield them to those for which He seems to have endowed them?

By none ought the work to be hastily entered upon: when the question is raised in any mind, as to whether this be the field of labour for *her*, much counsel, much thought, much prayer should precede the decision.

Nor let it be thought that the existence of such Institutions as these Sisterhoods, will form any excuse for the neglect of self-denying acts of charity on the part of those not connected with them; or that they are intended to take all necessity of visiting the poor *from those*, who hitherto have found a portion of time

amongst their other avocations to give to this Christian duty. Sad indeed would this be—a deep injury instead of benefit to the Church. “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction” is, in a greater or less degree, the bounden duty of every Christian, and a benefit to each individual soul who fulfils it, which it would be indeed grievous to snatch away. Every exertion that can be made by Christian men and Christian women, is needed even in this our Christian land, to bring souls out of spiritual darkness, and to alleviate the sufferings of bodily want. The institution of these little bands of visitors, whom we call, for distinction’s sake, by the name of Sisters of Mercy, is to supply that kind and that amount of assistance which seems at present not to have been supplied in any other way. And, surely, instead of being a hindrance to other acts of Christian love, they will be found a most efficient help,—a centre round which all may work—bringing a rich blessing to the Church at large by their daily charity and daily prayers.









